# Return to Work [Place]

*Insights into post pandemic trends in office design*

# About the Author

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Peter has been very active within the contract furniture industry both locally and nationally. Throughout the years he has been a leader in many organizations and trade groups. His leadership roles include:

- International Office Products & Furniture Dealers Assoc. (IOPFDA) Former Chairman
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- Office Furniture Dealers Alliance (OFDA) Board of Governors, Former Chairman
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# Preface

In the last 40 years, the workforce in the United States has steadily shifted from being primarily manufacturing, to a majority of office workers. Today, there are 100 million white collar knowledge workers in the US, and it is their productivity and achievement that drive the economy and propel individual businesses to new heights. Because these workers are so critical to an organization's success, it is vital that their workspaces support, encourage, and inspire them to do their best work every day.

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In 2020, the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a rapid shift in how employees think about work and their physical office space. This mass disruption amplified and accelerated many workplace trends that have been emerging for several years. Employee expectations, habits, and beliefs about workstyles and workplaces are now forever changed, so in short, the workplace must be redefined. The future is here today, and as workers are returning to the physical office in large numbers, the need for flexibility has never been more prevalent. Company owners and executives are examining their spaces to determine a course of action in an attempt to meet employees' evolving needs and expectations.

# Hybrid Work

The primary role of an office is to support workers as they perform their daily tasks. Those tasks generally fit into four modes: focus, collaboration, learning, and socialization. Early in the pandemic it was widely thought that the home offices of a 100% remote work force could effectively meet the needs in all four of these modes. In fact, a much-discussed hypothesis was that the physical office may have become an obsolete vestige of the 20th century. That notion, however, has been largely put aside, as a majority of managers now realize the importance of coming together as a team. With that in mind, the predominant, emerging and most accepted model is a hybrid, or partially remote workforce.

Research is now showing that most workers are accepting, and managers are developing plans for a workforce that can seamlessly shift from remote, to in-person work.

While in the physical office, workers prefer the flexibility to move to different areas throughout the workday to support their ever-changing activities.

As leaders reexamine their offices, they are asking many questions:

- *What are the advantages and disadvantages of being together in the office vs. remote work?*

- *What is the right balance of remote vs. in-person work?*

- *Is social interaction a key element of workplace design?*

- *Can the office be transformed into a tool to increase collaboration, teamwork, and productivity?*

- *How does office design promote and support company culture and brand?*

- *What amenities will it lure employees back to the office?*

- *What changes need to be made to the physical environment to support the new work paradigm?*

# Office vs. Remote Work

When discussing working remotely, there seems to be a different perspective between employees and employers. According to a recent workplace survey by Gensler, many employees have expressed a desire for continued remote work, or at a minimum, a hybrid of partially remote, partially in-person work. However, it is interesting to note, that many employees who have expressed a preference to work from home, report that the lack of physical separation from their workspace is detrimental to their work-life balance. Employees who save time by avoiding traffic during long commutes find that the physical proximity to their home office space make it harder to "disconnect" from their work, and they end up working longer hours.

*"**85%** of employees prefer working in the office in some capacity."*

*"Only **15%** of employees would choose to be full-time virtual workers."*

Many executives view the physical workplace as an essential element for a high performing company. The physical office is considered the epicenter of a work eco-system, acting as a primary tool to drive productivity, innovation, collaboration, personal and professional connection, communication, and ultimately high levels of performance. The office can be an important tool as companies strive to attract, retain, and most importantly, to engage their employees. The office can be vital to promoting and enhancing brand image and company culture.

A 2021 McKinsey study underscores the need for in-person work. The survey found that although some completely "heads down" work may be more productive in remote settings, that increase is offset by tasks that were shown to be less effective, including: negotiations, critical business decisions, collaboration, brainstorming sessions, providing sensitive feedback, and onboarding new employees.

Research is available that the divergent perspectives of employee and employer are resolved by embracing a hybrid approach to working. According to a 2021 survey by Eden Workplace, 62% of respondents said they prefer a hybrid model and a full 85% want regular access to a traditional office. Only 15% of employees would choose to be full-time virtual workers. Interestingly, employees seem to have grown tired of working from their kitchen table, den, or spare bedroom. In the same survey, more than half of the respondents embraced the concept of working in a professionally designed, traditional workplace.

# Connection

Humans by nature are social beings and as such we have a need for connection and interaction. As far back as 1954 when Maslow developed his "Hierarchy of Needs" he determined that a sense of belonging and connection were crucial elements to human happiness and well-being. In fact, our need socialization and human connection is above our need for safety and security. Since so much of our time is spent working in the office, the work experience plays an important role in the fulfillment of the craving we have as humans for interaction with others.

*"Many fully remote workers report feelings of loneliness and isolation."*

Office workers often report that they feel that they are part of a team or belong to a community with an important social connection to co-workers and friends. This connection often provides a strong bond between the employee and the larger organization, helping companies to engage and retain employees. Virtual meetings, texts, and email may provide some sense of connection, however, many fully remote employees report feelings of loneliness and isolation. This seclusion can lead to feelings of depression, low energy, and ultimately lower productivity and in the most extreme cases, employee turnover.

Communication and a free flow of ideas suffer when there is a lack of human connection. Virtual exchanges are often far less creative, less rich, and less beneficial than in-person meetings, spontaneous conversations, or chance meetings that take place as employees encounter and connect with each other around an office throughout the day.

Workplaces are an important tool for employees who are looking to advance their career. The physical proximity to other workers and supervisors can inspire them, allow them to meet and interact with mentors, learn, absorb the company culture, and to grow more quickly than entirely remote workers. On the other hand, fully remote workers, lack the connection to supervisors, partners or managers. This can put professional development and promotion opportunities at risk. It is now thought that remote workers can be negatively impacted by "proximity bias", where in-person workers are often considered to be better employees than their remote counterparts.

# Productivity

Many workers make the case for continued virtual work by stating that there was "no loss, or even a gain in productivity" when nearly everyone headed for their home offices as the pandemic began its advance across the country. A close examination of the underlying facts suggest that this high level of productivity may not be sustainable going forward.

A major factor in the success of mass "work at home" policies, was that when everyone shifted from the physical office to working virtually, everyone was already fully trained, knew their role, knew their co-workers, and had a relationship with their leaders. They understood the company culture and everything that was expected of them. There may have been small adjustments that were needed, but this quick "shift to remote" was far easier than hiring, on-boarding, and connecting to new employees in a virtual environment.

*"Employees working at home often report having even more, albeit different diversions."*

Another common belief is that remote workers are more productive at home because they have less distractions and interruptions from co-workers during the workday. This, however, seems to be a myth which is dispelled when examined more closely. Employees working at home often report having even more, albeit different diversions, than those experienced at the office. Distractions including, kids, pets, spouses, as well as a temptation to take care of personal tasks like laundry, walking the dog, or getting dinner started can all play a role and result in a decrease in productivity for workers at home.

# Destination workplace

Increasingly, company executives believe that teamwork, collaboration, exemplification of brand image, and building a strong company culture are simply not easily done with a remote workforce. To lure employees back to the office, leaders are beginning to think about the workplace as a destination and are reworking the space to create an experiential community.

Essential elements to "pull" employees back are spaces that offer individual choice, comfort, and control. Facility managers and designers are being asked to create a workplace experience that is adaptable, responsive, and flexible, providing workers with a variety of settings and amenities based on their needs while performing different tasks during a given day.

It is interesting to note that many of these key elements are already present in todays' offices, it is the square footage allocation to each element that is evolving. Floorplates that once contained rows and rows of stations specifically assigned to individual workers are going through the process of "de-densification".

Prior to the pandemic, floorplans were steadily increasing the density of workstations. According to JLL research, the average square feet per employee in 2020 had shrunk to only 196 square feet, far less than the 325 square feet per person in 2000. The post-pandemic recommendation for healthy, safely distanced spaces, is to increase the allocation per person or decrease the density by between 25% to 50%.

2000

325 sq. ft. per person

2020

196 sq. ft. per person

Post-Pandemic

With a hybrid, distributed workforce it is possible to redeploy and reimagine existing spaces, moving from a "one size fits all" approach to a flexible and more customized experience. Square footage is being reassigned from individually assigned workstations ("me" space) to more flexible and inviting collaborative team areas ("we" space). Office designs now include multiple and distinct areas or zones, specifically designed to accommodate numerous work activities throughout the day. Following, we will examine the zones in an "activity-based design" floor plan.

Traditional Floorplan

12

Activity Based Floorplan

Focus
Collaboration
Social Connection
Meeting
Flex

13
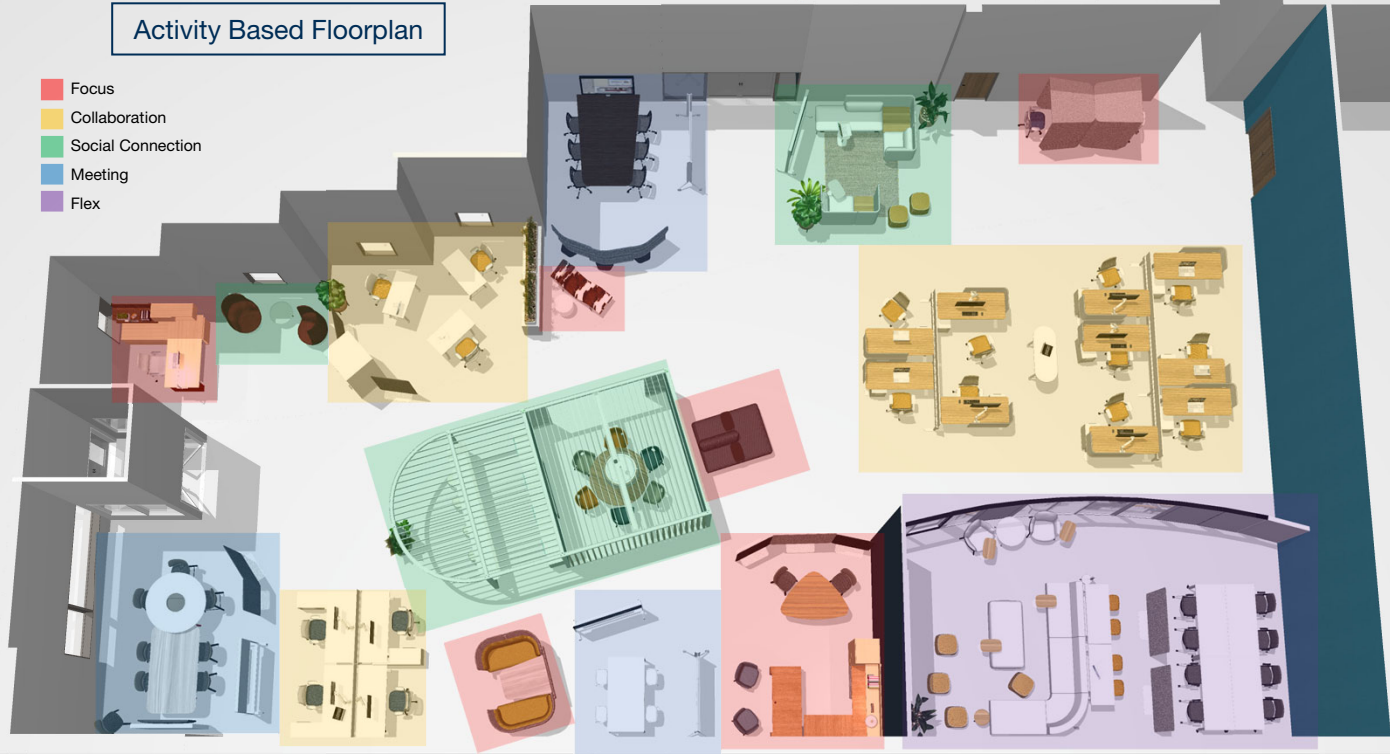
# Focus Zone

Heads down, focused, individual work is the primary mode for many knowledge workers. Therefore, for a company to be successful and productive, it is imperative for office designers to get this component right. Ideally, spaces for concentration provide some level of acoustical and visual privacy in order to shield workers from disruption. Traditional workstations, small private offices, individual "booths" and small meeting rooms can all provide employees with a place to work uninterrupted or to have private or sensitive phone conversations.

*"Heads down, focused, individual work is the primary mode for most knowledge workers."*

Depending on how often a worker is coming to the office, this individual space may be permanently assigned to them, or simply allocated to the employee or to a team on a daily, weekly, or "as needed" basis. This temporary assignment system is commonly referred to as "free-address", "hoteling" or "hot desking". Implementing a free address system allows company leaders to reallocate formerly individual space, to dedicate more square footage to collaboration, meeting, and socialization areas.

Features to consider adding in a free address environment include a storage system to house workers necessities when they are not in office. This is usually a bank of lockers, or mobile pedestals that can be easily brought to their assigned station for the day. Next, in an open plan environment, a sound masking system greatly reduces disruptions and facilitates concentration by rendering nearby conversations unintelligible.

# Collaborative Zone

Communal spaces that can be used by teams and fellow employees for collaboration and group work. In the post-COVID era these spaces are increasingly available as the floorplan evolves. Before the pandemic about 40% of office space was devoted to collaborative space. Today's more open and progressive office design dedicates approximately 60% or more to team areas.

These shared areas may include some or all of the following:

- small groups of workstations
- benching stations
- soft seating & "home-like" living room areas
- stand up tables or counters

These are all areas where employees can gather and work together as a group, often in a more casual setting. Providing visual communication tools such as, movable screens, easels, lightweight mobile tackboards and markerboards, along with easily accessible or portable power, also can help to facilitate brainstorming sessions and teamwork in these spaces.

Another trend is to provide touchdown or huddle areas throughout the office. These are purposefully designed and placed to facilitate impromptu, spontaneous meetings as employees encounter each other as they move around the office throughout the day.

# Socialization / Connection Zone

Since the mid 1990's when Starbucks Coffee began providing workers with an alternative place to take out their laptops and get some work done, there has been a trend in otherwise more traditional office environments to provide the same type of casual, communal space. The progressively designed office now inevitably transforms its' cafeteria or break room into a work café. This vastly increases utilization as the space can be used throughout the workday for both scheduled and spontaneous interactions, not just during the lunch hour. The space can be both collaborative and focused since some individuals will choose the coffee shop atmosphere over a traditional workstation to do their heads down work.

"…unlike traditional conference rooms, in many cases multiple meetings will be conducted simultaneously, and in close proximity"

These spaces work best when multiple choices are available, small tables for individual work, larger tables for collaborative and team meetings, high top or standing height tables for quicker, more spontaneous meetings and booths for a bit more privacy. It is interesting to note that unlike traditional conference rooms, in many cases multiple meetings will be conducted simultaneously, and in close proximity, since workers are already accustomed to the paradigm of a busy restaurant or coffee shop.

# Flex Zone

The requirements of individuals, departments and teams change rapidly. A large multipurpose, adaptable space stocked with easily reconfigured furnishings (Folding or flip top tables, stacking and nesting chairs, movable screens, flip charts, and whiteboards) can be quickly converted to serve a wide variety of needs. A flex space can accommodate training, brainstorming sessions, presentations, workshops or even networking events and social gatherings.

# Meeting Zone

A geographically distributed and hybrid workforce increases the need for spaces where employees can gather for both in-person, and hybrid virtual meetings. To meet this need, multiple smaller meeting rooms are being designed. These are replacing larger more traditional conference rooms since research has determined that 75% of all meetings have four or less participants.

These small areas are sometimes referred to as "Video Chat Rooms" and should be equipped with enhanced virtual connectivity, allowing participants to seamlessly integrate remote members with those who are present.

Because of the frequency and quantity of meetings during a typical day, an electronic scheduling or digital signage system that facilitates the efficient use of space resources is recommended. There are many software, hardware and app based systems to facilitate the scheduling and monitoring the efficient use of meeting spaces.

Another trend integrates technology into non-traditional meeting rooms, utilizing more open spaces to facilitate quick collaborative group work. This photo illustrates a presentation or collaboration setting with multi-level seating. This arrangement is more casual and is useful for unplanned gatherings. Because there are no floor to ceiling boundaries the space feels more spontaneous and less like a typical conference room.

# Green Zone (Outdoor Spaces)

A rapidly emerging and popular trend is the integration of easily accessible and well-appointed outdoor space as part of the office. Increasingly, patios, terraces, balconies, and roof tops are being transformed into some of the most adaptable square footage in the building. By adding accessible power sources and strong Wi-Fi availability, these outdoor spaces easily support individual heads down work, open air presentations, meetings, and social gatherings. Employees welcome the opportunity to take their break, stay and work, or meet and interact with co-workers in the healthy fresh air. Employees with access to open air workspace report greater feelings of safety, health, and wellbeing.

"Outdoor workspaces can dramatically increase worker creativity, productivity, and concentration."

Biophilic design has been implemented in office design for some time. It involves bringing nature and other outdoor elements to indoor spaces. Moving in the opposite direction, moving traditional indoor elements to the outdoors was originated at the turn of the century by the iconic architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. It was not until recently though that the idea of outdoor space as part of the office landscape is being largely embraced. Experts now believe that outdoor workspaces can dramatically increase worker creativity, productivity, and concentration.

# Safe Workspace

As employees are asked to return to the office after the COVID pandemic, there is a need for increased emphasis on the adherence to safety protocols, health, and well-being. Building owners cannot simply meet minimum requirements, but rather, must address the complex needs and overall comfort of occupants.

Employee expectations include workplace distancing procedures, health screenings and increased facility cleanliness. Consideration may be given to adding touchless or hand-free technologies to everything from keyless entry systems to door openers, faucets, soap and paper dispensers, or hand dryers. Additionally, adding and encouraging the use of hand sanitizer and disinfecting stations in multiple locations around the office, especially in commonly used areas, will help employees to feel more comfortable.

Even before the pandemic, a desire for more green-building techniques was driving many building owners toward upgrading their ventilation and filtration systems in an effort to improve indoor air quality. Post-pandemic, the trend is amplified and there is exciting research that underscores the benefits of, and also helps to justify the costs of, these improvements. The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health has found that improved indoor air quality doubled occupants' cognitive function test scores and increased decision-making ability. Clearly such increases will lead to increased productivity in the office.

# Conclusion

Because both management and worker expectations about the office continue to shift rapidly, flexibility is an essential element both in the choice of products, and in the over-all office design. Progressive thinking organizations have shifted their view of the workplace from merely the place we come to work, to the epicenter of a collaborative eco-system. The office is now recognized as an important tool that connects workers to each other, and to the organization. That connectivity motivates and engages workers, facilitating high levels of creativity and productivity.

To increase teamwork, collaboration, creativity, and communication, managers are seeking to voluntarily draw individuals back to the office. Flexible, amenity rich spaces are a way to lure employees in, versus simply mandating a return. The overwhelming majority of employees report that they want to return to a space that meets their complex needs. A full 85% of workers have expressed a desire to return to the workplace at least some of the time.

There are many important reasons to rethink and redesign your workspace. The widespread shortage of experienced and capable workers means that a well-designed, flexible workplace that employees want to come to, can be a differentiator in the race for talent. The workplace can reinforce company culture and improve business outcomes.

Post pandemic workplaces will probably never be the same, but that is not a negative proposition. Going forward, offices will be places that enhance the employee experience, draw people in, and provide flexible support for all modes of work: focus, collaboration, learning and socialization.

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M&M Office Interiors was founded in Milwaukee in 1961 to furnish clients with highly productive work environments, a tradition that continues today. In 1976 M&M began its long-standing relationship with Haworth, becoming a Preferred Dealer. M&M expanded into the Madison Market in 2014 and now serves all of central and southern Wisconsin. Over the past 60 years M&M has proudly remained a closely held, privately owned business.

M&M's team of highly skilled workspace professionals is committed to providing a solutions-based, consultative approach to workplace design. We utilize industry leading products, and services to provide our clients with "the space they want and the experience they deserve". Our adherence to high professional standards has repeatedly earned us Haworth's coveted "Best in Class" distinction for exceptional performance.

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